

Making a Difference

In this excerpted essay, Canadian writer and social activist June Callwood argues that individuals can make a difference and she focuses on concrete, practical ways that people can effect change. Apathy, in her view, is the worst evil.

About a year ago, newspapers were full of a story about a woman new to Canada who had been beaten by her husband. Many people who read about it felt sympathy for the stranger hiding in a women's shelter, facing an uncertain future.

A widow of small means, a woman with grown children, called some friends. "We should do something about this," she said.

"You're right," one of her friends replied. "You should."

"Oh dear," she replied. "Me?"

"Why not?" the friend said.

The next day, news stories about the case included a few lines about a new fund that had been established. The public was informed that donations to help the battered woman could be sent to a bank, and an address was given. The widow had done three things: after consulting her bank manager, she opened an account in the woman's name with a donation of her own; then she called the media to tell of the existence of the fund; and then she contacted the police officer in charge of the case and asked him to give the woman her name and telephone number.

The assaulted woman gratefully called and they met for coffee. Over the next few weeks her benefactor raised enough money to help the woman get resettled and became the woman's companion, assisting her to find her way around the city.

"I feel very good about this," she told everyone. "I've learned a lot."

What she meant by this was her visits to a women's shelter where she talked to women fleeing from violence, and her indignant discoveries about how the welfare system works. Her experiences had changed her comfortable view of society and she was telling her friends about it, her opinions given weight because she was the only one among them with first-hand knowledge. She didn't seem to notice that she had changed greatly. She had been a warm, sympathetic woman who believed herself to be hopelessly ineffective; she had discovered instead that she was a warm,

sympathetic woman who was capable and resourceful. The difference in her was pronounced; there was a new firmness in her voice and bounce in her walk.

Hannah Arendt, philosopher and writer, was absorbed much of her life with an effort to understand the nature of good and evil. In her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, a study of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi who bore a major responsibility in the Holocaust, she directed her considerable intellect to an analysis of evil. Her conclusion was that evil thrives on apathy and cannot exist without it; hence, apathy is evil.

When injustice encounters inertia, it uses that passivity exactly as if it were approval. In the absence of protest, evil is nourished and can flourish. The nature of goodness, therefore, bears a keen relationship to intervention. Individuals who seek to save their souls, or serve their consciences, or find meaning in their lives, or who wish to attain the quiet splendour of moral growth, are obliged to participate in their society. . . .

Nietzsche said that people wait all their lives for an opportunity to do good in their own way. Such patience is rarely rewarded. Moments when a useful contribution can be made by taking action almost never wear a name tag. Instead, they always look like "someone else's responsibility—not my business."

In moments when they are dissatisfied with themselves, most people yearn for a chance to do a redemptive good deed. They fantasize about taking leadership to get a much-needed crosswalk for the neighbourhood, or throwing themselves into good works. The problem is: how to start.

First, no one should shrink from the healthy element of selfishness that nourishes selflessness. While seeking to better their society, it is reasonable for people also, and not incidentally, to hope to improve their self-worth. It is a motive not to be derided or denied. Elevating self-esteem by behaving admirably has an ancient and honourable tradition. . . .

Altruism is the expression of the individual's best self, the god in the machinery. Instead of waiting shyly to be asked, some people simply seize an opportunity. One woman who visited a geriatric facility seven years ago noted that some of the aged were too weak to lift a spoon. Since then, twice a day she feeds a meal and chats to lonely people. Another woman read about children on ventilators who live in a hospital. She enrolled as a volunteer and goes twice a week to see a little girl she takes for walks

in the corridor, reads to, and for whom she entertainingly describes the caprices of her cat. Another woman dropped in at Nellie's, a Toronto hostel for women, and asked what she could do. The staff person was dealing with an emergency at the time and asked her to get herself a cup of coffee and wait. Later, when she went in search of the volunteer, she found her scrubbing the stairs.

Another woman, a welfare recipient, was incensed that a developer had his eye on some green space where children played. She went to City Hall and persevered through polite evasions and pointed snubs until she found a civil servant and a councillor who listened. What she began snow-balled into a noisy community meeting that resulted in saving the playground.

Making a difference starts with having a spunky attitude. The first thing to get out of the way is expectation that virtue always triumphs; in truth, most attempts to confront and defeat misdeeds are only partially successful or else seem to be outright failures. It doesn't matter; nothing is wasted in the universe. Even an effort that apparently goes nowhere will influence the future. Though the system looks untouched, it has a fatal crack in it. The next assault, or the one after that, will bring it down. At the very least, someone, somewhere, has learned a lesson and will be more thoughtful.

Victory, though highly desirable, is the second-best outcome of wading into a controversy on behalf of others. The real triumph is the act of making a stand and taking on the battle. It matters when someone makes an attempt to improve the quality of life for the neighbourhood, the society, the world. Even if contaminated soil continues to be dumped in the nearby lake, or better street lighting is denied, something has been achieved; someone cared enough to fight.

Real defeat isn't failure to attain the objective: it's not trying. Most people, as theatre critic Walter Kerr once put it, live half-lives halfheartedly. They cast themselves in the role of spectator, whatever the provocation to take action. The excuses are that no effort of theirs would succeed, or that in any case they don't know what to do, or they might look foolish, or what they do might make matters worse. "Innocent bystander" is an oxymoron. People who do not intervene when something is amiss give tacit permission for injustice to continue.

Becoming an activist takes practice, which can start on a small scale — like a beginner's slope for skiers-to-be. People can rehearse by responding to minor acts of tyranny: a racial insult, for instance; a clerk being high-handed with someone too intimidated to protest. The very young are powerless to challenge wrongdoing and therefore must tolerate it, but futile hand-wringing is unsuitable and unbecoming in an adult.

In recent years, so many people have taken up slingshots against corporate and government Goliaths that the paths are blazed for newcomers. Expertise abounds in where and how to apply pressure. Umbrella groups have been established in such fields as environment and disarmament; libraries list them in catalogues. Many communities have information centres that provide the location of such specialized services as daycare advocacy specialists or ratepayers groups. The National Action Committee on the Status of Women knows the field of women's issues and Tools for Peace or Oxfam in Canada can give the latest information about what's happening in Nicaragua.

A critical step, in short, is information-gathering. It makes no sense to waste enthusiasm and indignation by plunging blindly into a fight. Do as the 19th-century Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz always advised: secure your base, gather informed cohorts, study the terrain: knowledge is power. . . .

Success is no fluke. When the government changes its mind about allowing a logging road through a park, when officials do an about-face concerning schooling for learning-disabled children, those desirable outcomes are the consequence of a hundred meetings, most of them tiring and frustrating, where people with good information plan strategy and put together briefs. Often the catalytic force is one event or one person whose life has been touched by loss, but the movement that results depends for its power on attracting the most creditable expertise the community can provide.

A well-informed team, making thought-out moves, is invincible. Often the opposition is frayed and fragmented in comparison. It whines, obfuscates, denies. Positive-minded, fair-speaking citizenry, equipped with clear, well-researched proposals, has a distinct advantage. . . .

People fear being ridiculous more than they fear disaster. It takes courage to go against the stream. Never mind. If the path has heart in it, it's the right one and you're right to be on it. Moreover, you'll enjoy yourself.